The Cooperative Gardens
at
Farmington Woods

March 2025

DISHIN' THE DIRT
(or…how I learned to say "soil")

John Sahm, Cooperative Gardener

Growing up we had a 15x15 backyard surrounded by a 7-foot-tall wooden fence. The only decorations were 6-foot-high rough wooden clothesline poles. There was an 8X8 "garden" in the middle of the backyard in which my mother bullied several rosebushes into blooming. On days when I proved particularly annoying my Mom would not-so-nicely request that I "take your cars and trucks and go play in the dirt". I gladly complied. Nothing, but nothing, beats hard-pack for scraping out roads and highways. By requisitioning a couple tablespoons you could excavate tunnels, build bridges, and scoop out a quarry. Not so good for growing things UNLESS you're part Drill Instructor and command roses to bloom. I still play in the "dirt" but with a trowel and with a totally different perspective about "dirt". It's still highways, roadways, and tunnels, not for toy cars and trucks, but for all the micro-organisms that contribute to healthy plants and vegetables.

You find some of the healthiest soil on the forest floor or in untended fields. It's a very simple layered construction. In a nutshell, the soil layers from the top down are the dying, the dead, and the really dead. That top layer is composed of newly fallen or dying plant or organic matter (the dying). Right underneath that is the same stuff that fell last year or even before that (the dead). The third layer is stuff so old there's no nutrients left in it (the really dead). In this layered condition, humans haven't touched it. If humans were to touch it, you would get some phenomenal growth. Why? Because all the elements for healthy plant growth are there. What are they and how do I duplicate them in my garden?

I'm going to fast-forward to the soil products we offer for sale to our gardeners when they purchase a garden plot. Those products used in the right combination create a healthy growing environment. We offer raised bed mix, lobster compost, peat moss, and mulch. Let's talk about what constitutes good soil and how these products can work together. The heavy lifting for plant growth is in the top 6-8" of your soil. And I do mean soil.

The average gardener (like me) spends an inordinate amount of time mulling over a plant purchase -looking for the perfect plant in the perfect state of growth. We should spend LESS time on plant selection and MORE time on soil development. If you take care of the soil, the soil will take care of the plant. So, what do you want/need from your soil? You need "Goldilocks" soil – soil not too porous but not impenetrable, not too wet but not too dry, compact but breathable, etc. The key, Grasshoppers, is balance. They refer to it as "friable" soil. (It doesn't mean you can cook with it.)

Your soil must be such that it provides organic material for your plants. That's the role of compost. Compost is decayed plant and animal matter. A lot goes into quality compost. The organic matter must meet criteria and then it's churned in mounds to make sure it attains a temperature that kills weed seeds and troublesome bacteria. What you get is a very dark, very rich product loaded with nutrients (lots of nitrogen with potassium and phosphorous) that, when broken down, is absorbed into plant roots. So, I just buy compost, right? Not so fast, Pilgrim!

Water is the ingredient that breaks down the organic material into soluble nutrients that plant roots absorb. Peat moss is a valuable, natural product that retains water. Balance is very important. You should be careful not to let peat moss out on its own. Peat moss is harvested from peat bogs. If you've ever watched an archeology show or any Viking show, you know that well-preserved Anglo-Saxon "mummies" have been unearthed from peat bogs. Very well-preserved "mummies". Why? Peat bogs are an anaerobic environment. Little to no air, which is the element that spurs decay. Peat moss NEEDS to be mixed with something or else it will retain too much moisture, which will drown the roots of your plants. Not good. Way back when, I mentioned that plant roots need air. Peat bogs ain't got any. Don't turn your garden plot into a peat bog.

Marry compost and peat moss together and you have the start of great soil.

Now is a good time to discuss "friable" soil and to administer a practical "friability" test. Soil shouldn't "clump". If it does, it means it's too moist and has the potential of drowning seeds or young plants. If it is so loose as to fall apart, then it's too dry – no moisture to break down nutrients into soluble compounds. Take your gloves off, reach into your garden and take a palm-full of soil. Close your fist on it. Open your fist. Did it clump together? Bounce the back of your hand. Did the "clump" fall apart. If it initially "clumped" then broke apart on the bounce, then, friends, you have friable soil!

I described mixing two soil products together – compost and peat moss – there's a very useful third product we don't sell but is available in garden centers like Bidwell's and Larson's Ace Hardware. Vermiculite or it's cousin Perlite. Have you ever purchased potting soil and seen white specks/kernels in the mix? That's vermiculite/perlite. It's there for oxygen

reasons. Clay (a terrible growing medium) is composed of very small molecules which neither water nor air can permeate. Sand (a unique growing environment) is composed of very large molecules – molecules so large that water passes right through. Adding vermiculite/perlite to your soil creates air pockets that allow plants to breathe and helps moderate water retention. Good stuff. Necessary – not so much.

We sell compost and peat moss, but we also have raised bed mix available. The great thing about raised bed mix is that it has EVERYTHING. If you read the ingredients, you'll see compost and peat moss featured. My preference is to use all three, although you can probably do very well with just the raised bed mix. The three key nutritional elements that every soil needs are Nitrogen, Phosphorus, and Potassium. You see it on every bag of fertilizer in the store, N-P-K, with three digits that describe their relative mix by volume, like 5-4-1. That translates to 5 parts nitrogen to 4 parts phosphorous to 1 part potassium. In most books and in my soil workshop there will be mention of additional nutrients, the list of which could drive you crazy. Those are not ingredients to worry about at the start. Why? Because all soil has those elements in it AND any soil product you purchase will also have those trace elements in it.

One last layer essential for a healthy and attractive garden is mulch. We promote Sticky Straw. It's 98% seed free and it's organic – the "sticky" is beet juice and it prevents it from flying around too much when you apply it. Mulch mitigates the temperature whether it's heat or cold, helps regulate water intake and prevents weeds. Weeds need access to sun and a 6-8" cover of straw deprives weeds of necessary sunlight. You still need to pull weeds, but it's a lot easier.

I have always liked a balanced mix for the soil in my garden. In that regard, I mix compost, peat moss, and raised bed mix in equal parts. I throw in vermiculite for good measure. I want a growing medium rich in nutrients, able to retain moisture so I only need to water every third day, and with sufficient air pockets to create a loose soil that makes transplanting and seed-growing easy.

So, recognize that "soil" is different from "dirt". You may have graduated from building roadways in the dirt to harvesting dinner from very rich, very healthy SOIL.

PS Starting in March we will be scheduling Garden Workshops which are open to the community. While there are goodies for everyone, the focus will be practical gardening tips for the Coop Garden.

Tips and Tricks

2025 Committee

John Sahm, Chair
Robert Gwizdak
Linda Papertsian
Stefanie Lang
Brenda Larkin
Dick Adams
Pat Figliola
Wendy Gill
Pam Prindle

Important Dates in 2025

- Invoice and product order return date – **March 15**
- Workshops – Soil Development **March 9**

2025 Garden Plot Invoice and Product Order Forms Are Mailed!
Please return your payments and order forms by March 15, the Ides of March. Don't forget to read the stuffers – your responsibilities as a gardener and a survey for volunteer tasks!

Prime Real Estate Available!!!
We still have a couple plots in prime locations left. Contact Pat and let him know (Pat Figliola - pmfigliola@gmail.com). We keep a waiting list when the gardens are fully subscribed but we have plots available NOW!.

Driveway and Shed
Waiting for the ice and snow to clear before work on the shed and the driveway can commence. Now that the bar renovation is complete, the shed repair and the driveway scraping are the next projects. We're hoping to have both done come Spring, if there is a Spring. Sheesh!

Communication is Key!
We can't help if we don't know. Every year, as a committee, we have to contact gardeners when their garden gets out of control either infested with weeds (which go to seed and affect everyone), or with bushing plants that impede access to walkways or to a fellow gardener's plot. Many times, this can be avoided by simply calling/emailing/texting a committee member for needed help. We know that "stuff" happens – illness, vacations, work responsibilities. We can pool resources and help, but we haveto know about an issue BEFORE it becomes major. So, please call if you need help.

Open House – Feb 23rd, Heritage Room, 1:00-4:00
We had a nice turnout and 11 information tables with a HUGE assortment of handouts. The handouts will continue to be available at our workshops – Soil development, What to Grow and When/Where to Grow It, and Pests

Soil Testing
The Ct. Agricultural Experiment will test your soil for FREE! And they generate a very useful report. Look them up online. They make it easy and the instructions are very simple. The drop-off location is in Windsor and easy access.

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